

Wrecking business for car thieves

Vehicle theft drops 18%

The stolen vehicle rate in Victoria dropped by almost a fifth in 2003. National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council figures show that 22,418 cars were stolen in Victoria, a drop of 18.1% on the previous year.

Across Australia, 93,578 vehicles were stolen in 2003, a drop of 14.7% on 2002.

Statistics show the Holden Commodore was the 'most popular' vehicle among thieves, with 18,210 thefts, while more than 10,000 Ford Falcons were stolen in 2003. The Ford Laser was the only other vehicle to record more than 3000 thefts (4261) with Toyota's Corolla, Corona, Tarago and Camry, the Mitsubishi Magna, Hyundai Excel and Mazda 626 featuring in the top 10.

Figures for the December quarter show Victoria recorded a 0.3% reduction on the previous quarter, with 5174 cars stolen in the last three months of 2003.

All States and Territories recorded a fall in vehicle theft over the same period, with the total of 21,506 vehicles stolen Australia-wide representing a 7% drop in national figures.

The Written Off Vehicles Register has been instrumental in curbing professional car thieves since it was introduced in Victoria two years ago. Now that a 'wrecks register' has been established in each State, authorities are closing the gaps in a national scheme to consign car rebirthing to the scrap heap.

Victoria was one of the first States to establish a Written Off Vehicles Register, with the register set up on May 1, 2002. The system became national in October 2003 when WA implemented the register.

In the two years the register has operated in Victoria, the stolen car rate has dropped by almost a third. While other factors, such as the reinstatement of the Victoria Police Organised Motor Vehicle Theft Squad, have also played crucial roles, authorities attribute much of the 30% reduction to making it harder for professional thieves to rebirth vehicles.

In the past, professional thieves have taken vehicle identifiers from a wrecked vehicle and used them to rebirth a stolen vehicle. But with a wrecks register in place, the details of every wrecked vehicle are logged on the register.

If damage to a vehicle is so severe it can only be used for parts, the vehicle is classed as a statutory write-off and cannot be re-registered and the Vehicle Identification Number cannot be re-used. Nearly 2000 statutory write-offs have been placed on the wrecks register in the past two years, severely curtailing professional thieves' access to wrecks.

If a vehicle is a repairable write-off, it must go through a Vehicle Identity Validation inspection (booked by VACC in Victoria) before it can be re-registered. The inspection verifies a vehicle's identifiers belong to the vehicle that has been repaired and it has not been stolen and rebirthed.

Victoria Police said the Written Off Vehicle Register was having a significant impact on professional car thieves, in respect to rebirthing stolen vehicles.

An Organised Motor Vehicle Theft Squad spokesperson told *Auto* initiatives such as the register made it much more inconvenient and expensive for professional vehicle thieves to conduct their business.

National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council Executive Director Ray Carroll said the wrecks register has had a major impact on the ability of professional car thieves to obtain new identifiers to rebirth vehicles.

The register had been a big help to police and parts recyclers have indicated the register put an immediate end to inflated prices for wrecked cars at auctions, which thieves previously bought for their identifiers.

VACC's Murray Liston, who manages the Vehicle Identity Validation (VIV) inspection service, agreed the wrecks register has had a significant impact on vehicle theft and there was evidence of a reduction in vehicles being rebirthed across State lines since the wrecks register became national.

He said the VIV service received 4500 bookings last year and has already received 2500 bookings in the first three months of 2004.

"The wrecks register has caused a lot of thieves to rethink their business," Mr Liston said.

"This is an important issue for VACC's Licensed Motor Vehicle Traders, particularly small independent used car traders that are targeted by professional thieves.

"If they buy a vehicle that has been rebirthed, they will be out of pocket when it is discovered. With one phone call, they can check the status of any second hand vehicle before they buy it." **aaa**

Before purchasing a second-hand vehicle, check its written-off status by telephoning VicRoads on 131 171. More information is also available on that number or at www.vicroads.vic.gov.au